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Guest Editor's Introduction

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Special Issue: Reformulating the Historiography of Late Chosŏn Buddhism: New Theories, Materials, and Perspectives

Guest Editor's Introduction

There are two reasons late Chosŏn Buddhism deserves more attention from the academe: 1) It is difficult to accept that the modern tradition of Korean Buddhism arose from a religion that was persecuted by the state to the point of becoming no different from a tradition of cultic practices such as shamanism. In other words, given the level of development of modern Buddhism, Buddhism of the late Chosŏn period was clearly highly developed institutionally, culturally, and in its system of education and practice. 2) Following from this, modern Korean Buddhism's heritage from the Chosŏn period includes much of its current monastic practices, ritual culture, architecture, and extensive printing legacy of religious texts and printing boards, with more than 950 titles originating from the late Chosŏn period.

The past antipathy towards Chosŏn Buddhism that contributed to a lack of interest in tackling research on it is especially poignant considering the quantity and richness of the extant source materials from the Chosŏn period. It is perplexing that research into this period has not been more developed given that there remains a significant amount of materials from this time period that have thus far not been fully explored, including published Buddhist texts and printing boards from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries,¹ steles of eminent monks,² and nectar ritual paintings.³

Current research reveals that during the early and late Chosŏn periods Buddhism in general did not decline or become socially isolated, as has so often been touted. Of course, descriptions of decline and isolation depend on how they are qualified, but even simply based on the pattern of Buddhist publications and construction records for stele of eminent monks, the Buddhist community during the Chosŏn dynasty exhibits signs of continuity and possibly

even growth.⁴ In fact, the Chosŏn dynasty saw the establishment of a new form of Buddhism that continued throughout the late Chosŏn period and even arguably flourished in certain periods of that dynasty, which deserves further attention. It is clear that the late Chosŏn was a time of new developments in Buddhism, including the formation of a new self-identity,⁵ a unified curriculum, and a systematized form of practice for the community of monastics (Lee 2012; 2012a),⁶ and when the institutional strength of the religion was sustained (Kim 2019b). These are fundamental elements for establishing and continuing both a community and a tradition such as Buddhism.

Up to the early 1980s, perceptions of Chosŏn Buddhism were overwhelmingly of a degenerate and dying tradition, which led to scholarly disinterest in the subject, both locally and internationally. On the other hand, Buddhism remained a source for those seeking to study popular forms of Buddhism that managed to survive by gaining support mostly from the masses, and particularly from women patrons, often from the upper class. Chosŏn Buddhism was simply deemed unworthy as a field of research into “uncorrupted” forms of Buddhism.

The need to ameliorate such misperceptions and develop the field of studies of Chosŏn Buddhism was recognized in a special edition of this very journal some eight years ago, although to be sure such recognition did exist earlier.⁷ The current special issue is in some sense a continuation of what was called for by Boudewijn Walraven in that 2012 issue (vol. 3, no. 1). Although the current special issue has similar intentions, the current collection of papers is also an attempt to push research towards new perspectives with new methodologies. Nonetheless, in the previous special issue on Chosŏn Buddhism that was published under the title, “Late Chosŏn Buddhism,” Walraven as the guest editor opened his Introduction with the following:

The past century has seen a huge imbalance in the study of Korean Buddhism. Most attention has been devoted to the early period and particularly to Buddhism in Silla, where Wŏnhyo (617–687) emerged as a towering figure whose influence reached far beyond the Korean peninsula. Koryŏ, too, received considerable attention, particularly thanks to the printing of the Tripitaka [. . .] Twentieth-century scholars of Korean Buddhism (among whom quite a few Japanese) accordingly adopted a negative perspective on Chosŏn Buddhism. Official policies of the Confucian government designed

to curtail and control Buddhism were deemed to have resulted in intellectual stagnation and a relegation of Buddhism to the lower classes (accompanied by a vulgarization of its contents, often disparagingly referred to as “shamanization”). Particularly the second half of the Chosŏn period, after 1600, has been regarded as hardly worthy of serious research. (Walraven 2012, 5)

Although there have been some developments in these regards, the conditions and misperceptions held by many scholars still hold true. In the 2012 special issue, the contributions highlighted the resilience of the Chosŏn Buddhist community by turning to historical materials that painted a divergent picture, that of temples and a community active in navigating the challenges posed by the state policies towards Buddhism. Even though that 2012 special issue showcased examples where Buddhism was not the passive victim of anti-Buddhist state policies, there was an underlying premise of Buddhism’s degeneration and isolationism through which it was able to survive.⁸ In contrast, the current special issue departs from this discourse and accepts Buddhism as more independent and established without falling to the level of degeneration as previously claimed.

The current set of articles challenges the past methodologies and perspectives that have steered research on Chosŏn Buddhism in the direction of its putative degeneration and isolation. In other words, the prevailing narrative of Korean Buddhism of the Chosŏn period has been reinforced by mainstream research methods, which have mostly utilized official materials and taken a state-centered perspective—a methodology that was fundamentally biased towards a Confucian outlook on all matters concerning the Chosŏn period.⁹ This methodological framework was one of the reasons alternative perspectives were not so easily adopted and the lackluster image of Chosŏn Buddhism persisted.

Nearly a decade after the aforementioned special issue of the *Journal of Korean Religions* there have been strides made in the direction called for by that 2012 issue.¹⁰ Furthermore, there has been an increase in interest in excavating Chosŏn Buddhism by expanding research into other fields, such as studies of temple artifacts, bibliographic studies, and art history. Though these new approaches will surely help in yielding fresh ideas and new insights into

Chosŏn Buddhism, new theories and methodologies are needed that could bring to light the various developments in the diverse quarters of Buddhism. Moreover, research is needed on Buddhism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially the eighteenth century, when it appears that the Buddhist community was at its peak, institutionally, culturally, and in the development of monastic practices.

There is in fact a figurative blind spot in our knowledge of Buddhism during the period starting from the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, something alluded to as early as 2003 by Cho Eunsu.¹¹ Despite increased interest by emerging scholars who have started to examine the period after the Imjin Wars, namely the seventeenth century,¹² the hiatus in research on the time period from the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century remains. The significance of this period lies in that it provides the immediate background from which Buddhism entered the modern era, at the same time that Japanese Buddhism made in-roads into Korea and established a dominating influence on the modern developments of Korean Buddhism.

Against this backdrop, there are also signs of a growing realization outside the circle of Buddhist studies scholars, that is, by both foreign and Korean scholars of Korean history, of the importance of Chosŏn Buddhism to a more comprehensive understanding of the Chosŏn period.¹³ This is tantamount to realizing that Buddhism has, together with Confucianism, played an integral role in the history and lives of the Chosŏn people. Indeed, such research trends are an apparent indication that the field of Chosŏn Buddhism is on the cusp of producing a large body of scholarship on the long and rich history of Chosŏn Buddhism.

As part of a step in a similar direction, one of the foremost aims of the current collection of articles is to move beyond Confucian-centered and state-centered perspectives and beyond traditional materials such as the *Sillok* or the writings of the leading social intellectuals, who in most cases were Confucian scholar-officials. Thus, the attempt is to move toward politically neutral but relevant materials, which may involve non-traditional sources such as geographical maps, ritual paintings, or steles that may require “reading” into the subtexts of the materials at hand.

For instance, the article by Son Sŏngpil in this issue focuses on the number of Buddhist scriptures that were published during the pivotal period of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The findings that emerge differ starkly from what has been understood about Buddhism in relation to the Chosŏn state. Son shows how the temple publication of Buddhist texts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remained largely unaffected by the state's anti-Buddhist policies. This was a time when the System of Governance of Buddhism (Sŭngjŏng 僧政) was repeatedly enacted and then abolished. The publication numbers of Buddhist texts show no relation to the dates this policy was applied. Son argues that this indicates that the publication of Buddhist texts was made possible by the well-established and robust economic foundation of the many temples that existed at that time.

There were many Buddhist temples in Chosŏn Korea of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and donation sources provided the foundation upon which temple publication of Buddhist texts actually increased up to the end of the seventeenth century. These publication records reveal that Buddhist temples during this time were not in a destitute state, as evidenced by the amount of resources and human labor required to publish such large volumes of texts.

Another example of reading into the records of Buddhism is the article by Sung-Eun T. Kim. Kim shows how donor ledger information can be analyzed and patterns of donations over the centuries can be determined. The sponsor ledgers of temple works reveal a trove of evidence on the mutual commitments and intimate relationship that existed in the Chosŏn period between the Buddhist temples and wealthy men and women of the upper class. Kim argues that sponsorship by the wealthy and powerful was a lifeline for Buddhism, as it has been through Buddhism's long history throughout Asia. Despite Chosŏn's five centuries of Confucian rule and that state's anti-Buddhist policies, the monastic community continued its relationship not only with the masses, but also with society's socio-political elites. According to Kim, this relationship between Buddhism and the men and women of the gentry had many facets and layers, as evidenced by the ledgers and the nature of the sponsored temple works.

Sung-Eun T. Kim has determined that the donor ledgers for temple works throw a wrench into the still widely accepted narrative of Confucianization or Confucian domination of Buddhism. His article argues that what has been

perceived through the simple lens of dichotomy and conflict are in reality complexly interrelated, and possibly even symbiotically related, factors, such as the case of the upper class's support of temple works and their temple culture.

Dichotomy and conflict provided a simple framework for interpretive purposes that was widely used, but with possibly significant loss of nuance, or simply inaccurate representations and interpretations, as a result. In the case of the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism during the Chosŏn period, such an interpretive model has become unfortunately common. For example, pro-Buddhist or anti-Buddhist interpretations were applied to Chosŏnites as if these two stances were the only ones that existed at the time. The rational is that those who were steeped in the culture and teachings of Confucianism must have been anti-Buddhist, based on the Confucian theory of heterodoxy. Therefore, the scholar-officials and the Confucian literati must without a doubt have been anti-Buddhist, and the women pro-Buddhist. Those who crossed this interpretive line were interpreted as anomalies, such as at times the Chosŏn kings Sejong (r. 1418–1450) and Sejo (r. 1455–1468), or even some high-standing scholar-officials, such as Tasan (1762–1836). The notion that these actors were pragmatic and rational in their contact with Buddhism is for some odd reason thrown out the window.

In his article, Kim Kijong challenges precisely this commonly applied conflict model. He re-examines vernacular translations of Sinitic Buddhist texts during the period of King Sejong and King Sejo. Previous Scholars have argued that King Sejo intended to strengthen his authority by imitating King Sejong's actions, and that Sejo's attempt to revitalize and popularize Buddhism is evidence of his affinity for that religion. However, Kim Kijong concludes that the vernacular translations were more a pragmatic effort at governing the people by edifying the laity and strengthening the scholastic training of the Buddhist clergy, while at the same time conforming to Confucian social values. Kim affirms that the fifteenth-century vernacular translations were more characteristic of cultural control of Buddhism with the aim of social stabilization, which is inherently a different approach from either a pro- or an anti-Buddhist method of interpretation.

Finally, the article by Kim Yongtae attempts to expand the field of interpretation both geographically and temporally by arguing that Chosŏn Buddhism needs to be examined diachronically as well as synchronically, where the context encompasses events of the wider East Asian region. Kim argues that in order to fully appreciate the new Korean Buddhist tradition that was formed in the seventeenth century, diverse historical and contextual elements need to be examined in an interrelated approach. With this in mind, Kim focuses on the issues of dharma lineage and monastic curriculum in the early seventeenth century by applying interpretations based on the diachronic and synchronic perspectives. Kim bases his approach on the understanding that a new tradition was established which reflected the aim and identity of Chosŏn Buddhism that had in fact experienced an international geo-political shift, most clearly through the Imjin Wars but also through such cultural and ideological influences as the sinocentric heterodoxy of Buddhist lineages.

Kim concludes that in the final analysis, and contrary to the previously accepted perception, Chosŏn Buddhism was not an isolated tradition suppressed on the peninsula and isolated from East Asia. Past research on Chosŏn Buddhism has limited its scope to the period and area of Chosŏn and viewed it relative to Confucianism as sitting under the cloud of heterodoxy and removed from the center of power. However, in adopting a broader scale of interpretation, the proposed diachronic and synchronic perspectives need to be applied to the interior-exterior and to the chronologically distant and near. For instance, together with the inherent continuity and temporal changes of Buddhism, the central figures, information, and texts of Buddhism need to be considered, not only at the local level but also in the dimension of international transmission. As Kim argues, ultimately, in researching Chosŏn Buddhism we should aim to delineate the contours of the interactions between the local (uniqueness) and the global (general) over time and space.

By combining the diverse approaches touched upon above, and as discussed in the individual articles in this special issue, we are able to offer a more rounded understanding of what Buddhism represented, how it functioned, and who patronized it within Chosŏn society. While this collection of articles

hopefully constitutes one step toward bringing Buddhism of the Chosŏn period out of the shadows, there are still centuries of Buddhist history occupying an academic blind spot and waiting to be brought into the light.

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Notes

- 1 See Son (2013; 2019) for lists of Buddhist texts and printing boards dated to the end of the seventeenth century. According to an unpublished compilation of an on-going project of the known and newly discovered Chosŏn Buddhist texts and printing boards, the combined number of titles currently comes to 578 (16th century), 565 (17th century), 325 (18th century), and 24 (19th century). This project is led by Yi Jongsu at Suncheon National University, Korea.
- 2 Sung-Eun T. Kim (2012; 2019b) mentions that 94 and 47 stele for eminent monks were erected during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively, in comparison to 51 stele during the seventeenth century. His research has largely focused on the seventeenth century.
- 3 Kang and Kim (1995) have noted that the largest number of nectar ritual paintings date from the eighteenth (19 paintings) and nineteenth (10 paintings) centuries, followed by the twentieth (7 paintings), seventeenth (3 paintings) and sixteenth (2 paintings) centuries. Although Kang and Kim have described the paintings, they do not deviate from a largely descriptive analysis.
- 4 If we accept Sung-Eun T. Kim's argument that steles are an indication of the institutional development of the Buddhist community, then there is institutional growth in the seventeenth century and further growth in the eighteenth century, based on the erection of 51 and 94 stele during those respective periods (Kim 2019b, 223–225). Moreover, if isolation is defined as lack of contact with larger society, then records of donations by the people reveal this notion to be erroneous since such records abound from the start to the end of the Chosŏn period. Donation as a matter of

mutual support between the temple goers and the temples is examined by Sung-Eun T. Kim in this special issue.

- 5 See Sung-Eun T. Kim (2020) for a more detailed discussion of this. This is also discussed by Kim Yongtae in his article in this special issue.
- 6 The development of the monastic curriculum and the system of practice, referred to as the Three Gates (Sammun 三門), is well summarized in English in Kim Yongtae (2015, 133–140).
- 7 There were earlier recognitions of the need to revamp the narrative of Chosŏn Buddhism's decline, views which started in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Examples include Kim Yongcho (1983), Yun Yŏnghae (1994), Kim Yongtae (1999; 2008), and Cho Eunsu (2003).
- 8 For instance, Huisuk Nam (2012) argues Buddhism turned to popular Pure Land cults catering to the needs of the people in order to survive the oppressive period of the Chosŏn dynasty. Han's (2012) article was an interpretation of the temples' actions as responses by destitute temples with few alternatives and nowhere to turn but to other temples facing a similar situation.
- 9 This issue of scholars' dependence on the official state record of the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* is examined in more detail by Sung-Eun T. Kim (2019a).
- 10 The very discourse on this issue of Buddhism's decline was brought to light in Hwansoo Kim's article, "Buddhism during the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1919): A Collective Trauma?" where Kim acknowledges that, "Recent scholarship on Chosŏn Buddhism has greatly challenged the narrative that Chosŏn's Neo-Confucian 'orthodoxy' persecuted Buddhism, thus leading to its decline and isolation" (2017, 103).
- 11 Eunsu Cho, "Re-thinking Late 19th Century Chosŏn Buddhist Society," *Acta Koreana* 6(2) (2003): 87–109.
- 12 There is new hope in that the work of these scholars is diverse and does not subscribe to the traditional negative views of Chosŏn Buddhism. They have accepted the value of uncovering the diverse cultural, political, and historical faces and the overall significant role that Buddhism has played in Chosŏn society.
- 13 Two recent examples, one in Korean by Chŏng Yögŭn (2019) and the other in English by Jungwon Kim (2019), have endeavored to include Buddhism as a necessary element in a full and nuanced understanding of Koryŏ and Chosŏn history.

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